



GRADUATION SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, June 22, 2008

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Lection - Proverbs 3:13-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 13) Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, (v. 14) for her income is **better than silver, and her revenue better than gold.** (v. 15) She is **more precious than jewels,** and nothing you desire can compare with her. (v. 16) **Long life** is in her right hand; in her left hand are **riches and honor.** (v. 17) Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. (v. 18) She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy.

I. Description of Liturgical Moment

Annual Graduation Sundays are a time to reflect on the accomplishments of our young people, as we celebrate together their unlimited potential. For a people who have had limited academic

access, annual Graduation Sundays are occasions to “look what the Lord has done,” in the lives of those only recently descended from people whose highest aspirations, constricted by lack of opportunity to get an education, were to be domestics and field hands. But now we can look back on how far the Lord has brought us...

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Proverbs 3:13-18

Part One: Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I am one who remembers each of the graduations I have had in my life. Whether it be from junior high, high school, college, and beyond, my graduations were well attended events full of proud family members pleased to see that I, a child born to teenaged parents who had barely finished high school when I was born, had achieved one more milestone in life. My high school Graduation Sunday was particularly memorable because of the Red KJV Gift Bible that was given to me by New Bethlehem Baptist Church. The occasion when I received it had such an impact that I carried it with me to college, was motivated by it to find a Christian fellowship at Howard University, and even used it for weekly Bible studies. Rest assured, such events can have an enduring affect on the life of a young Christian.

Perhaps that is why one of the proudest moments in my life was having the opportunity to speak for such an occasion while serving as interim pastor of a large local congregation. There were between 75-100 students flanking the altar, who had completed their studies on one level, and were preparing to commence another level of study. To see so many young African American scholars striving to realize their full potential gave me hope and reminded me of the importance of education for improving lives.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Wisdom Literature of ancient Israel is a varied genre with examples that appear in many biblical books, but consists primarily of material in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. These three books are surprisingly dissimilar, offering at times contradictory instructions to their pupils and promising everything from personal gratification to material remuneration for fidelity to God, and prudence in the world. Our current text is lodged in Proverbs, which contains several distinct collections of wisdom sayings, and is located in a section that begins addressing instruction to “my child.” Such a designation demonstrates the nature of this brand of folk wisdom, which was supposed to pass requisite life skills from one generation to another, providing the moral direction and the business acumen that a young person would need to make it through life.

The instructions given here are particularly pertinent for Graduation Sunday for they extol the virtues of wisdom. The Hebrew term for wisdom, *hochmah*, means wisdom in the generic sense, but also represents such concepts as cunning, knowledge, and dexterous proficiency in a skilled craft. *Hochmah* can best be understood as ability brought on by diligent study and practice; and as such, the acquisition of such wisdom resonates well with the achievements we celebrate on Graduation Sunday.

It is also important to note that the *hochmah* described in Proverbs presumes knowledge of God. As 1:7 notes, “the fear of YHWH is the beginning of knowledge.” Frankly the passage states that if there is no “fear of God” (better understood as “religion”), there is no *da`at* or knowledge. The term *da`at* is used here as a synonym for *hochmah*, and is generally consistent with what we mean by education. There is no more significant point to emphasize as we preach from this text than that YHWH is the ultimate source of all education, for wisdom, knowledge, and understanding all flow from God (2:6).

Proverbs persistently emphasizes the necessity of God-given wisdom for survival; that “long life is in her right hand” (v.16) is a reminder that without *hochmah*, people driven by “foolish” urges and desires will inevitably perish without *her*, this feminine expression of God’s own being. What a significant message in an age where “foolishness” can cost you your life! Our children are losing their lives daily because of the “foolishness” of unprotected sex in the age of HIV, because of the “foolishness” of protecting turf and saving face and thereby participating in black on black violence gone rampant, and because of the “foolishness” of drug selling and drug abusing at a moment of epidemic rates of African American incarceration. In light of this, we should ceaselessly emphasize the importance of wisdom for the survival of our young people; we need *hochmah* to negotiate our world or we will die; but in *her* is long life.

A study performed by a University of Pennsylvania research team confirms this, showing that “faith in Christ” actually reduced the level of criminal behavior for African American teens. The more they were involved in the Church, the less likely young people were to commit crimes. This trend was true even for children living in communities that generally spawned more criminal behavior; the more time children spend in church acquiring Christ’s *hochmah*, they will be less likely to fall under the supervision of the Criminal (in)Justice system.¹ We cannot ignore this at a time when young African American males are as apt to be found in prison as in college. Consider the troubling trends on African American incarceration offered at www.exodusfoundation.org.

A study carried out at Washington University in St. Louis showed that “going to church” not only correlated with decreased criminal behavior, it also correlated with decreased drug use, cheating, stealing, vandalism, drunkenness, *and an increase in time spent in school work*. Young people raised in the church “achieve at higher levels academically than their less religious counterparts.”² Science thus verifies that the “fear of the Lord” really is the beginning of knowledge. In fact, this is a knowledge that more of our young people must have.

In our messages for Graduation Sunday we should emphasize that coming to know God and God’s *hochmah* is at the heart of learning. Without it, “book-learning” is empty. Our children need to hit the books and hold on to the Good Book” and the God who is its subject. Herein is the principal lesson to teach our children before they confront ideologies that will at time be hostile to their faith as they pursue advanced levels of study. Their faith is not incompatible with what they learn in school; in fact there should always be a constant dialogue between their faith and their education, for all that they learn in school is how to better understand the world our God made. *They cannot ever let what they know, obscure Who they know!* In essence, this reading would suggest that more important than “book learning,” is God reverencing! The old folk said it this way “Get the learnin’ and the burnin’.

Finally, this passage is a must read for all of our children in our materialistic, “bling”- oriented popular culture, for it is significant to remember that *there are things far more precious than gold, platinum and diamonds*. Far more valuable than what is around your neck is what is inside your head. *Hochmah* plays a crucial role in determining our success or failure in life. There is a strange irony in the words of this passage that should not be lost as we preach this text; while *hochmah* is more precious than material possessions and therefore must be our priority, living a life of *hochmah* will provide the gifts in “her left hand” which are the very riches that too many of us make the most important thing in our lives. It is far better to seek *hochmah* for *hochmah*’s sake than to seek wealth, for those who do so will inevitably find the gifts in *her* left hand.

Celebration

Hochmah is required for our young people if they are to survive and thrive at this historic moment when powers and principalities are squarely arrayed against them. Christ centered instruction offers them the opportunity to excel and to achieve the best life that this world has to offer. We, pray that our young people find Wisdom, for she is more precious than silver or gold and in her hand is life.

Descriptive Details

This passage evokes images of “bling.” This image can be used in sermons or classes to discuss the temptations of material possessions and how they can easily lure our young people into destructive behavior. Contrast these images with notions of wisdom and demonstrate that with wisdom as a weapon young people can withstand the pull of popular culture. The image of the “tree of life” is a potent symbol of what it means to thrive; it can be used as a primary symbol in a sermon. We should not ignore the feminine aspects of God as *Hochmah*.

Notes

1. Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society. Johnson, Byron R. “The Role of African-American Churches in Reducing Crime Among Black Youth.” CRRUCS report 2001. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 2001. Online location: http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/crrucs2001_2.htm accessed 15 March 2008
2. Williams, Trina R. Larry E. Davis, Julie M. Cribbs, Jeanne Saunders, and James H. Williams. “Friends, Family and Neighborhood: Understanding academic outcomes of African American youth.” Center for Social Development. Washington University. St. Louis, MO: Urban Education 37.3 (2002): 408-431.